

It's All about Empathy

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*Frankly, there isn't anyone you couldn't learn to love
once you've heard their story. —Fred Rogers*

em·pa·thy (\ˈem-pə-thē) noun:
The ability to understand and share the feelings of another.

The books in this issue of *First Opinions, Second Reactions* focus on empathy. It's a quality we need now more than ever. In a time of racial tensions, hate crimes, religious intolerance, sharp political divides, and socioeconomic disparities, the ability to understand others' views and situations different from our own isn't just helpful—it's a vital skill (Gorski and Swalwell 34–40). The willingness to see others' perspectives and leverage that understanding toward dialogue and collective care is foundational to a robust democracy. And early on, crafting that ability in young children and adolescents through talk about books is an opportunity to not only encourage empathy, but also to connect to contemporary social justice issues in our multicultural society in an authentic and age-appropriate way (Lewison, Leland, and Harste; Nelson).

Literature has long been recognized as having the ability to let readers live vicariously through characters and live in unfamiliar realities, creating imagination and empathy (Kidd and Castano; Mar, Oatley, and Peterson). The books we have chosen for the spring issue invite children to engage in conversations about what's fair, what's kind, what's just, how help matters in difficult situations, and putting themselves in someone else's shoes to feel what it's like to walk around.

There are five titles reviewed in this issue. The first is *Those Shoes*, a picture book by Mari-beth Boelts, which follows Jeremy, a boy who covets—but can't afford—the newest high-tops all the other boys at his school are wearing. We follow Jeremy's disappointment and desperate desire to fit in, fixated on those shoes. When he finds a too-small pair at a thrift shop, it's almost a dream come true, until he realizes there may be someone else who could get better use out of them. It's a heart-wrenching decision: should he keep them or pass them along?

The second book is *Each Kindness* by Jacqueline Woodson. It takes the perspective of Chloe, a girl who has friends at her school who want nothing to do with Maya, the new girl who joins their class and often asks to play at recess. When Maya moves away, Chloe reflects on each chance she might have had to show kindness and make the world a little bit better that she didn't realize would be important until it was too late.

The third book, *Last Stop on Market Street* by Matt de la Peña, follows a boy, CJ, and his grandma as they take the bus after church on Sunday all the way to the “dirty part of town.” They don’t have a car, or an iPod to listen to music like other kids he sees. But CJ’s grandma helps him to notice the everyday beauty around him on the trip, and the other kind and interesting people who also ride the bus. Their stop leaves them at a soup kitchen, and it might surprise you what they do there.

The fourth book, *The Invisible Boy* by Trudy Ludwig, follows Brian, a boy who never gets noticed by his peers or even his teachers at school. Brian is invisible, and usually alone. When a new student, Justin, comes to school, Brian smiles shyly at him and draws him a cartoon to make him feel welcome. Justin isn’t like the other kids at school who leave Brian out, pretending not to see him when picking kickball teams or passing out birthday party invitations. And, when Justin invites Brian to team up on a class project, Brian finally gets recognized for his special talents and his ability to be a good friend.

The last book is a young adult chapter book, *All American Boys*, by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely. It delves into the tense and complex issue of racial profiling by taking alternative perspectives. Some chapters are voiced by Rashad, a black boy who was beaten by police at a convenience store; others are voiced by Quinn, a white boy who witnessed the beating. The book’s characters come to grips with justice despite traditional alliances, and they navigate relationships in the complicated aftermath of a divided community and school.

We hope this issue will inspire teachers and parents to have conversations about social justice topics and bring empathy into everyday conversations with children to make the world a better, more understanding, and more tolerant place to be.

Works Cited

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